

"Cutting Fool"

The Evidence of Faith



Eyewitness Stories In the
Oral Tradition,
from Charleston's Sea Islands

A Tribute Verse Book For the Charleston
Martyrs

Walter Rhett

--Charleston, August 17, 2015

My favorite rice spiritual,
“Draw Lebel” sung of the spring’s work
preparing and leveling rice fields,
reminding all of the need to prepare for Judgment
and to Strengthen and Temper their character.

Its chorus told of “angels coming down.” Combining work and prayer
in the compass of poetry to urge tireless effort: “draw, draw, to the break
of day.” Gullah prayer and song joined heaven and earth to work and
faith, across the “separating line” of life and death.

Gullah’s secret glory was a belief that creation is the revelation of living;
and language is creation’s tool.

In her WPA narrative, “Born in Slavery,” in 1938, a 100+ year old Charleston
woman shares

how words of prayer and praise

fit her formula for living:

"All you got to do is live right, you got to live the life. What is the
life? Purity.

What is Purity? Righteousness.

What is Righteousness? To do the right thing.

Pray and praise.

Believe on the delivering Savior. Trust Him.

He lead you; He show you the way. That all you got to do.

Believe—pray—praise."



“The Cutting Fool,” (or) *The Sharpest Axe*

Evidence of Faith Unseen

A Verse Book



Edited from the 1938 Library of Congress typed manuscript, (the Gullah “b” stays for the English “v”), “Cutting Fool” is one of America’s richest allegories, a hilarious Edisto Island WPA story of a not-so-obvious, deep commitment of faith.

Among its themes: temptation, community, divine gifts and forgiveness, and identity.

(Typed manuscript) “Mike” [Ephriam] Lawrence was one of Major William Meggett Murray’s “fire boys.” With the specific duty of bringing live coals to him whenever the Major wanted to light his pipe.

“The things Mike tells about happened during his childhood.”

(Original) “I don’t member much ‘bout slavery time cause I been lee-little boy when war declare, I raise up under de Murray —all my generation belong to de Murray. Dey know how to treat slave. Ain’t lick um much, hardly any. Chillun hab easy time. All I been require to do was tote coal to Mosser when he ready fer light. Adam Mack and me, we been de fire boy.”



Ephraim's Tale

South Carolina Narratives, Volume 14, Part 3, 96-98.

“Old John Drayton was the smartest of them all.
He work so hard sometime Massa just got to stop him or he kill himself.
I nebber see such a man for work in all he life.

Massa think a lot of him 'cause he been a good field hand.
Besides, he know a lot about cutting wood and building fences.

What been more, Old John play for all the dances on the island!
He fair make the fiddle talk!
When Massa gib a dance he always call John.

Yassa, that man sure could play!
When he 'saw' down on the fiddle and pull out that tune, “Oh,
the Monkey Marry to the Baboon Sister,” he can make
the parson dance!

One day more then all, Massa Murray send word to Old John that
the cow break out of the pasture, and he got to mend the fence
quick.

But Old John done promise somebody on Fenwick Island to play
for a dance, and he steal past and go.

That been Friday night.
Massa say Old John got to finish the fence by sundown the next day.

When Old John ain't show up Saturday morning,
Massa ax eb'body “where he been?”
All band together and tell Massa they see him lebe in a boat
to go fish. And they ain't seen Old John since.

Massa been worry sure 'nough. He think Old John might hab drown.
He send four men to shoot gun all ober the creek to make John body rise.



Late that day, they drag the bottom.
Massa sleep with a heaby heart.
He been fond of Old John.

Old John come back from Fenwick Island early morning, Monday!
Before day clean [day light/sunrise], he in the woods cutting fence rails!

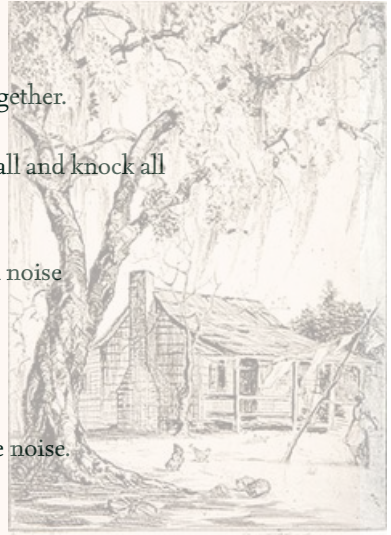
One hundred rails been call a good day's work.
But Old John decide he going
to do better then that. He find five tree close together.
He cut piece out ob every one.
Then he chop at the biggest tree and that tree fall and knock all
the rest ober with um.

When all them tree fall together, it make such a noise
old Massa hear um in he bed. He get dress
so he kin see what ruckus in the
woods.

Massa saddle he horse and ride 'till he git to the noise.
There he see Old John cutting like he crazy.
Massa been mad sure 'nough,
but then he glad to see Old John ain't drown.
He start to say some thing. But Old John sing out: "Go 'way massa,
I ain't got time to talk with you now."
Old John grab five maul, go to the five
tree and pitch a maul for every tree; then he grab the iron sledge.
Massa see

Old John run from tree to tree
with the sledge and quick as he hit a maul, the tree split wide open!
Massa start to say something,
But John won't let him talk. "Go on home to missus, massa,"
Old John say.
"I too shame, great God; I too shame!"
"Go on, home."

Massa turn round
in he track and go home without a word. He see



Old John ain't going to gib him no satisfaction 'bout Saturday.
 When he go back in the wood that evening to check up on Old John,
 Old John been cut five hundred rail!
 O Them hab been men in them day, I tell you.



Cape Coast Castle. Accra, Ghana. A high volume global exporting factory where you can still feel the anger. Visited by US President Barack Obama and his family, July 11, 2009.

Notes: Slavery in South Carolina created a unique American voice—a creative cacophony of speech, memory, meaning, and practice that originated with the enslaved themselves! But that voice has almost been drowned out. Right from the beginning, their voices were put out on the margins by cruelty, ignorance, and circumstance. They re-centered themselves and expanded language to hold multiple meanings.
 A proverb is an example:

“Blind mule ain't afraid of darkness.”

The “Blind mule” held ideas waiting to be unpacked.
 The proverb spoke:

To character—

Stubborn, short sighted, intemperate, impatient,
 imprudent, dreamy, trusting, indecisive, resourceful, intuitive;

To attitudes—

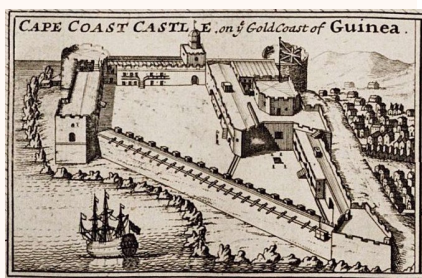
Delusion, narcissism, exaggeration, arrogance,
 deceit, cunning, desire, guilt; forgiveness, harmony;

To emotions—

Guile, anger; wrath, hatred, rage,, resentment,
 envy, jealousy, naivety, warmth, forgiveness, caring, hope;

To morality and fate—

Greed, frivolity; fortitude, good fortune;
 misdirection, sin,, abundance, an empty storehouse, fate.
 Success or catastrophe—depending on context.



The Africans' skills, attitudes, values and responses often triumphed slave's cruel and inhumane conditions.

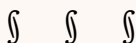
Widen its territory: the proverb explains the over- confidence of approaches to African-American history. Merge in Ralph Ellison's phrase: the blind mule can not see its own “moral evasion.” A blind mule can't see what lays in plain sight! The language of enslaved communities shared a treasury of memories, insights and experiences crafted, collected, intensively tuned, individualized and shared; expanded, cast wide, passed on. They were filled with instructions and demonstrations of how to walk the fine edge of community and administered authority.



“The Lord is my Strength and my Defense:”

Job 38: 12, 13

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind:
 “Who laid the cornerstone when the morning stars sang together
 and all the children of God shouted for joy?”
 “Have you ever in your life commanded the morning, and
 shown the dawn its place,
 that it might take hold of the earth by its edges,
 and the wicked be shaken out of it?
 It is changed like clay under the seal; . . .



The Gullah aesthetic always hides more it shows. What's hidden here?

How many stories in this book?

How many ways to “cut the fool?”

How many meanings in the title?

Stories of: Strength, knowledge, endurance, health, arts, team work, support; wisdom, faith, redemption, mercy and love in action.

Ways to: Cover your tracks. Keep silent.

Improve. Stay focused.

Meanings/ideals and examples for:

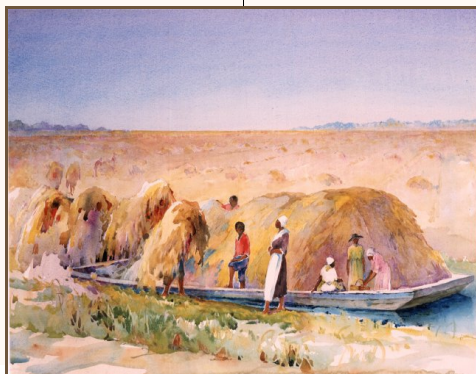
1. Talent, joy;
 acts of character
 with inner motives.

Points of view: the initiate, the offering. A measure and evaluation; a judgment.

2. Laughter, distraction, a reason to smile; a summary, the mask style. Misdirection. A command. A signal to spot and catch a contradicting purpose, attendant with “cutting the fool.” A style! A strategy.

“Cut the fool” traces to English street slang. It is redefined through ambiguous humor in the South by broad, multi-state communities of Africans, building a strong peace and family movement

while consciously slipping their chains and restraints.



Another Literary Yam
 by Walter Rhett



The Woloffs, Senegal. Paris Expedition Paintings

Walter Rhett Collection. Women and Griots. From "Côte occidentale d'Afrique: vues, scènes, croquis."

